THE HUSBANDS OF EDITH

By GEORGE BARR M'CUTCHEON

CHAPTER V.
The Distant Cousins.

THE end of the week found Brock quite thoroughly domesticated—to use an expression supplied by his new sister-in-law. True, he had gone through some trying ordeals and had lost not a little of his sense of locality, but he was rapidly recovering it as the pathway became easier and less obscure. At first he was irritatingly remiss in answering to the name of Medcroft; but, to justify the stupidity, it is only necessary to say that he had fallen into a condition which scarcely permitted him to know his own name, much less that of another. He was under the spell. Wherefore it did not matter at all what name he went by. He would have answered as readily to one as the other.

He blandly ignored telegrams and letters addressed to Roxbury Medcroft, and once he sat like a lump, with every one staring at him, when the chairman of the architects' convention asked if Mr. Medcroft had anything to say on the subject under discussion. He was forced, in some confusion, to attribute his heedlessness to a lifelong defect in hearing. Thereafter it was his punishment to have his name and fragments of conversation buried about in tones so stentorian that he blushed for very shame. In the Bristol, in the Kärntner-Ring, in the Lichtenstein gallery, in the gardens—no matter where he went—if he were to be accosted by one of the genial architects it was always in a voice that attracted attention. He could have heard them if they had been a block away. It became a habit with him to instinctively put his hand to his ear when one of them bore in sight, having seen him first.

"That's what I get for being a liar," he lamented dolefully. Constance had but whispered her condolences. "Do you think they'll consider it odd that you don't shout at me too?"

"You might explain that you can tell what I am saying by looking at my lips," she said. He was immensely relieved.

Considerable difficulty had to be overcome at the Bristol in the matter of rooms. Without going into details Brock resignedly took the only room left in the crowded hotel, a 6 by 10 cubby hole on the top floor overlooking the airshaft. He had to go down one night for his morning tub, and he never got it because he refused to stand in line and await his turn. Mrs. Medcroft had the choicest room in the hotel, looking down upon the beautiful Kärntner-Ring. Constance proposed, in the goodness of her heart, to give up to Brock her own room, adjoining that of her sister, provided Edith would take her in to sleep with her. Edith was perfectly willing, but interposed the sage conclusion that gossiping menials might not appreciate a preference so unique.

Roxbury Medcroft's sky parlor adjoined the elevator shaft. The head

"M'sieur is very fortunate in being so afflicted."

of his bed was in close proximity to the upper mechanism of the lift, a thin wall intervening. A French architect, who had a room hard by, met Brock in the hall, hollow eyed and haggard, on the morning after their first night. He shouted lugubrious congratulations in Brock's ear, just as if Brock's ear had not been harassed a whole night long by shrieking wheels and rasping cables.

"M'sieur is very fortunate in being so afflicted," he boomed. "A thousand times in the night have I wished that I might be deaf also. Ah! Even an affliction such as yours, m'sieur, has its benedictions."

Matters drifted along smoothly, even merrily, for several days. They were all young and full of the joy of living. They laughed in secret over the mishaps and perils. They whiffed and enjoyed the spice that filled the atmosphere in which they lived. They visited the gardens and the hofs, the chateau at Schonbrunn, the imperial stables, the gay "Venice in Vienna;" they attended the opera and the concerts, ever in a most circumspect "trinity," as Brock had come to classify their parties. Like a dutiful husband, he always included his wife in the expeditions.

"You are not only a most exemplary wife, Mrs. Medcroft," he declared, "but an unusually agreeable chaperon. I don't know how Constance and I could get on without you."

But the day of severest trial was now at hand. The Rodneys were arriving on the fifth day from Berlin. Despite the fact that the Seattle "connections" had never seen the illustrious Medcroft, husband to their distant cousin, there still remained the disturbing fear that they would recognize—or, rather, fail to recognize him!—from chance pictures that might have come to their notice. Besides, there was always the possibility that they had seen or even met Brock in New York. He lugubriously admitted that he had met unfortunate thousands whom he had promptly forgotten, but who seldom failed to remember him. It is not surprising, then, that the Medcrofts, ex parte, were in a state of perturbation—a condition which did not relax in the least as the time drew near for the arrival of the 5 o'clock train from the north. Constance strove faithfully, even valiantly, to inject confidence into the souls of the prime conspirators.

"You have done so beautifully up to this time," she protested to the dolorous Brock, "why should you be afraid? I once read of an Indian chief whose name was Young-Man-Afraid-of-His-Wife. He was a very brave fellow in spite of all that. You are afraid of Edith, but can't you be like the Indian? He"—

"That's all very nice," mourned Brock. "But he could cover his confusion with war paint. Don't forget that, my dear. Think of the difference in our disguises—war paint in daubs versus spats and an eyeglass! Besides, he didn't have to talk west end English. And, moreover, he lived in a wigwam and didn't have to explain a sky bedroom to strangers who happened along."

"That is a bit awkward," she confessed thoughtfully. "But can't you say that you have insomnia and can't sleep unless you are above the noise of the street?"

He looked at her with an expression that made a verbal reply to this suggestion altogether unnecessary.

"Nurse says that Tootles has forgotten the real Roxbury," she went on after a moment. "See how cleverly you have played the part."

Still he stared moodily, unconvinced, at the roadway ahead. They were driving in the Haupt Allee.

"I hope I haven't got Roxbury into trouble by that interview I gave out concerning the new method of fireproofing woodwork in office buildings and hotels. It occurred to me afterward that he is violently opposed to the system. I advocated it. He'll have a—I might say a devil of a time explaining his change of front."

As a matter of fact, when Medcroft, hiding in London, saw the reproduced interview in the Times, together with editorial comments upon the extraordinary attitude of a supposedly conservative Englishman of recognized ability, he was tried almost beyond endurance. For the next two or three days the newspapers printed caustic contributions from fellow architects and builders, in each of which the luckless Medcroft was taken to task for advocating an impractical and famous New York hobby in the way of construction, something that staid old London would not even tolerate or discuss. The social chroniclings of the Medcrofts in Vienna as dispatched by the correspondents offset this unhappy "bull" to some extent in so far as Medcroft's peace of mind was concerned, but nothing could have drawn attention to the fact that he was not in London at that particular time so decisively as the Vienna interview and its undefended front. Even his shrewdest enemy could not have suspected Medcroft of a patience which would permit him to sit quiet in London while the attacks were going on. He found some small solace in the reflection that he could make the end justify the means.

On their return to the Bristol, Brock and Miss Fowler found the fair Edith in a pitiful state of collapse. She declared over and over again that she could not face the Rodneys. It was more than should be expected of her. She was sure that something would go wrong. Why—oh, why was it necessary to deceive the Rodneys? Why should they be kept in the dark? Why wasn't Roxbury there to counsel wisely, and more, ad infinitum, until the distracted pair were on the point of deserting the cause. She finally dissolved into tears, and would not listen to reason, expostulation or persuasion. It was then that Brock cruelly but effectively declared his intention to abdicate, as he also had a reputation to preserve. Whereupon, with a fine sense of distinction she flared up and accused him of treachery to his best friend, Roxbury Medcroft, who was reposing the utmost confidence in his friendship and loyalty. How could she be expected to go on with the play if he, the man upon whom everything depended, was to turn tail in a critical hour like this?

"How can you have the heart to spoil everything?" she cried indignantly. He looked at her in fresh amazement. "Roxbury would never forgive you. We have both placed the utmost confidence in you, Mr. Brock, and"—

"Sh! Say, 'Roxbury, dear,'" interposed the practical Constance. "The walls may have ears, my dears."

Then Mrs. Medcroft plaintively implored his forgiveness and said that she was miserable and ashamed and very unappreciative. Brock, in deep humility, begged her pardon for his unnecessary harshness, and promised not to offend again.

"The first quarrel," cried Constance delightedly. "How nicely you've made it up. And you've been married less than a week!"

"Roxbury and I didn't have our first quarrel until we'd been married a year," said Edith reflectively.

"Oh, I say, Edith," exclaimed Brock, with a dark frown. "I'd rather you wouldn't be forever extolling the good qualities of my predecessor. It's very bad taste. Very much like the pies mother used to make."

"Silly!" cried Medcroft's wife, now in fine humor.

"Besides, Rox is an Englishman. It would take him a year to produce a quarrel. The American husband is not so confounded slow. I won't live up to Roxbury in everything."

It was decided that Constance should greet the Rodneys upon their arrival. The Medcrofts were not to appear until dinner time. Afterward the entire party would attend the opera, which was then in the closing week. Brock with splendid prodigality had taken a box for the final performance of "Tristan und Isolde." It is not out of place to remark that Brock loathed the Wagnerian opera. He was of "The Mikado" cult. He took the seats with a definite purpose in mind to cast the burden of responsibility upon his wife, who would be forced to extend herself in the capacity of hostess, giving him the much needed opportunity to secure safe footing in the dark area of uncertainty. He believed himself capable of diverting the youthful Miss Rodney and his discreet sister-in-law, but he was consumed by an unholy dread of Rodney pere. Something told him that this shrewd American business man was not the kind who would have the wool pulled over his eyes by any one. Brock felt that the support of Constance was of greater value than that of Edith at any stage or in any emergency.

Besides, he was now quite palpably in love with her. "I've got it bad!" he reflected in sober consideration of his plight; "but," came the ironic justification, "I'm able to confine it to the immediate family. That's more than most husbands can say."

CHAPTER VI.
Freddie Ulstervelt.

THE Rodneys descended upon the Bristol at 5 o'clock, rushing down from the Nord-Bahnhof as if there was not a minute to spare. Constance pursued Katherine to her room, where they revelled in the delights of a reunion, gradually coming out of its throes as the hour for dressing approached.

"We dine early, dear," said Constance. "with supper after the opera. I must be off to dress."

"I am so eager to meet Mr. Medcroft. Is he nice?"

"He's the dearest thing in the world!" cried the other, her cheeks aglow.

"I'm so glad, on Edith's account. Most of these English matches turn out abominably," commented Miss Rodney, who was twenty, very pretty and very worldly. "Oh, did I tell you that Freddie Ulstervelt is with us?"

"No!"

"We came across him in Berlin, and dad asked him to join us if he had nothing better to do, so he said he would. He was with us in Dresden and Prague and—don't you think he's awfully jolly?"

"Ripping!" said Constance with deplorable fervor.

"How awfully English! He said he'd seen you in Paris this spring."

"Yes," said Miss Fowler, her cheeks going red suddenly. "I told him you'd asked me to be with you in June." She could have cut out her tongue for saying this, but it was too late. Katherine laughed a trifle hardly after a still moment; then a queer light flitted in to her eyes—the light of awakened opposition. Constance was saying to herself: "She's in love with Freddie I might have known it." Back in her brain lay the memory of Freddie's violent protestations of love, uttered during those recent days in Paris. He had threatened to throw himself into the Seine; she remembered that quite well—and also the fact that he did nothing of the sort, but had a very jolly time at Maxim's and sent her flowers by way of repentance. Knowing Freddie so well, it would not have surprised her in the least to find that he had become engaged to Katherine. His heart was a very flexible organ.

"Oh," said Katherine, "I believe he did say that you had mentioned us." Of herself she was asking, "I wonder if she is in love with him?"

And thus it transpired that Freddie Ulstervelt—addlepated, good looking, inconstant Freddie, just out of college—was transformed into a bone of contention, whether he would or no.

He was of the kind who love or make love to every new girl they meet, seriously enough at the time, but easily passed over if need be. Rebuffs may have puzzled him, but they left no jagged scar. He belonged to that class which upsets the tranquillity of inexperienced maidens by whispering intensely, "Heavens, it's grand!" And he means it at the moment.

Katherine Rodney was in love with him. He belonged to a fashionable New York family of wealth, and he had been a young lion at Pasadena during the winter just past. He owned automobiles and a yacht and an extensive wardrobe. These notable assets had much to do with the conquest of Mrs. Rodney. She looked with favor upon the transitory Mr. Ulstervelt, and believed in her heart that he had something to do with the location of the shining sun. But of this affair more anon, as the novelists say.

Brock was presented to the Rodneys just before the party went in to dinner. He managed his eyeglass and his drawl bravely and got on swimmingly with the elder Rodneys, until Constance appeared with Katherine and Freddie Ulstervelt. It was not until then that it occurred to Miss Fowler that Freddie, being from New York, was almost certain to know Brock either personally or by sight. She experienced a cold chill, the distinct approach of catastrophe. Brock had just been told that young Ulstervelt of New York was to be of the party. His blood ran cold. He had never seen the young man, but he knew his father well. He had even dined at the mansion in Madison avenue. There was every reason, however, to suspect that Freddie knew him by sight. Even as he was planning a mode of defense in case of recognition the young man was presented. Brock's drawl was something wonderful.

"I—aw—knew your family, I'm sure—aw, quite sure," he said. "You know, of course, that I lived in your—aw—delightful city for some years. Strange we never met, 'pon my soul."

"Oh, New York's a pretty big place, Mr. Medcroft," said Freddie good naturedly. He was a slight young fellow with a fresh, inquisitive face. "It's

"You remind me of a fellow I knew in New York."

bigger than London in some ways. It's bigger upward. Say, do you know, you remind me of a fellow I knew in New York!"

"Haw, haw!" laughed Brock without grace or reason. Miss Fowler caught her breath sharply.

"Fellow named Brock. Stupid sort of chap, my mother says. I"—

"Oh, dear me, Mr. Ulstervelt," cried Edith, breaking in, "you shan't say anything mean about Mr. Brock. He's my husband's best friend."

"I didn't say it, Mrs. Medcroft. It was my mother." Brock was hiding a smile behind his hand. "She knows him better than I. To tell the truth, I've never met him, but I've seen him on the Fifth avenue stages. You do look like him, though, by Jove!"

"It's extraordinary how many people think I look like dear old Brock," said the false Roxbury. "But, on the other hand, most people think that Brock looks like me, so what's the odds? Haw, haw! Ripping! Eh, Mr. Rodney?"

"Ripping? Ripping what? Good heavens, am I ripping anything?" gasped Mr. Rodney, who was fussy and fat and generally futile. He seemed to grow suddenly uncomfortable, as if ripping was a habit with him.

Dinner was a success. Brock shone with a refulgence that bedimmed all expectations. His wife was delighted. In all of the four years of married life Roxbury had never been so brilliant, so deliciously English (to use her own expression). Constance tingled with pride. Of late she had experienced unusual difficulty in diverting her gaze from the handsome impostor, and her thoughts were ever of him—in justification of a platonic interest, of course, no more than that. Tonight her eyes and thoughts were for him alone, a circumstance which, could he have felt sure, would have made him wildly happy instead of inordinately furious in his complete misunderstanding of her manner toward Freddie Ulstervelt, who had no compunction about making love to two girls at the same time. She was never so beautiful, never so vivacious, never so resourceful. Brock was under the spell; he was fascinated; he had to look to himself carefully in order to keep his wits in the prescribed channel.

His self esteem received a severe shock at the opera. Mrs. Medcroft, with malice aforethought, insisted that Ulstervelt should take her husband's seat. As the box held but six persons, the unfortunate Brock was compelled to shift more or less for himself. Inwardly raging, he suavely assured the party—Freddie in particular—that he would find a seat in the body of the house and would join them during the entr'acte. Then he went out and sat in the foyer. It was fortunate that he hated Wagner. Before the end of the act he was joined by Mr. Rodney, horribly ill at ease and eager for relief. In a nearby cafe they had a whisky and soda apiece and, feeling comfortably reenforced, returned to the opera house arm in arm, long and short, thin and fat, literally discoursing upon the intellectuality of Herr Wagner.

"Say, you're not at all like an Englishman!" exclaimed Mr. Rodney impulsively, even gratefully.

"Eh, what?" gasped Brock, replacing his eyeglass. "Oh, I say, now, jove my word, haw, haw!"

"You've got an American sense of humor, Medcroft—that's what you have. You recognize the joke that Wagner played on the world. Pardon me for saying it, sir, but I didn't think it was in an Englishman."

"Haw, haw! Ripping, by Jove! No, no! Not you. I mean the joke. But then, you see, it's been so long since Wagner played it that even an Englishman has had time to see the point. Besides, I've lived a bit of my life in America."

"That accounts for it," said the tactless but sincere Mr. Rodney.

Brock glared so venomously at the intrusive Mr. Ulstervelt upon the occasion of his next visit to his own box that Mrs. Medcroft smiled softly to herself as she turned her face away. A few minutes later she seized the opportunity to whisper in his ear. Her eyes were sparkling, and something in her manner bespoke of bated breath.

"You are in love with my sister," was what she said to him. He blushed convincingly.

"Nonsense!" he managed to reply, but without much persuasiveness.

"But you are. I'm not blind. Any one can see it. She sees it. Haven't you sense enough to hide it from her? How do you expect to win?"

"My dear Mrs.—my dear Edith, you amaze me. I'm confusion itself; but," he went on eagerly, illogically, "do you think I could win her?"

"That is not for one's wife to say," she said demurely.

"I'd be tremendously proud of you as a sister-in-law. And I'd be much obliged if you'd help me. But look at that confounded Ulstervelt! He's making love to her with the whole house looking on."

"I think it might be polite if you were to ask him out for a drink," she suggested.

"But I've had one, and I never take two."

"Model husband! Then take the girls into the foyer for a stroll and a chat after the act. Don't mind me. I'm your friend."

"Do you think I've got a chance with her?" he asked with a brave effort.

"You've had one wife thrust upon you, why should you expect another without a struggle? I'm afraid you'll have to work for Constance."

"But I have your—I can count on your approval?" he whispered eagerly.

"Don't, Roxbury! People will think you are making love to me," she protested, willfully ignoring his question.

He returned to the box after the second act and proposed a turn in the foyer. To his disgust, Ulstervelt appropriated Constance and left him to follow with Mrs. Rodney and Katherine. He almost hated Edith for the tantalizing smile she shot after him as he moved away, defeated.

If he was glaring luridly at the irrepressible Freddie, he was not alone in his gloom. Katherine Rodney, green with jealousy, was sending spiteful glances after her dearest friend, while Mrs. Rodney was sniffing the air as if it were laden with frost.

"Don't you think Connie is a perfect dear? I'm so fond of her," said Miss Rodney, so sweetly that he should have detected the nether flow.

He started and pulled himself together. "Aw, yes—ripping!" He consciously adjusted his eyeglass for a hasty glance about in search of the easily disturbed Mr. Rodney. Then, to Mrs. Rodney, his mind a blank after a passing glimpse of Constance and her escort: "Aw—er—a perfectly jolly opera, isn't it?"

(To be continued)

An actor in Berlin looks so much like the Kaiser that he has been ordered to change his makeup.